

A Closer Look



Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the label reprinted on the back of this brochure. It provides information you cannot get simply by looking at the object.

When you have finished reading the label, consider the following:

Does the information in the label reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own? How?

Did it mention anything you did not see or think about previously? What?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you read the label first?

Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about an art object together to try to understand what a work of art means.

There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this painting might be:

Why would Lily Martin Spencer choose to paint her own washerwoman?

Is this a romantic or realistic depiction of a servant's life?

Who would want to buy a painting of a washerwoman in 1850? Why?

How do you think this washerwoman might have felt about this painting?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment involves questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art.

Do you think this painting is successful and well done?

Do you like it? Does it move you? Is it relevant to your life?

We hope this approach enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this painting. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each object:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

This brochure was written by Vivian Ladd, Museum Educator, and Barbara J. MacAdam, Jonathan L. Cohen Curator of American Art.

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HOOD
MUSEUM OF ART
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Lilly Martin Spencer,
American, 1822–1902
The Jolly Washerwoman
1851

Oil on canvas
Purchased through a gift from Florence B. Moore in memory of her husband, Lansing P. Moore, Class of 1937; P.993.25

This work was painted by a woman artist, Lilly Martin Spencer, who was one of the very few female artists of her era to earn her livelihood and to achieve national recognition as a painter. Through the sale of her works she supported, albeit with difficulty, her husband and thirteen children (seven of whom survived to maturity).

The Jolly Washerwoman depicts Spencer's own servant—probably Jane Thompson, a Scottish-born woman who was listed as the household's domestic servant in the 1850 census. She was likely to have been among the thousands of immigrants who fled Scotland and Ireland beginning in the late 1840s owing to a widespread food crisis caused by a potato blight. Irish and Scottish immigrants made up a large portion of the service classes in New York City, where Spencer worked at this time.

Spencer depicts her servant at close range, cheerfully doing the household laundry. The original round-arched frame—a format typically associated with religious subjects—enhances the artist's monumental presentation of a seemingly mundane and female-associated subject. As in other kitchen scenes by Spencer, the subject engages the viewer with a direct gaze and broad, toothy smile, an expression rarely found in paintings of upper-class subjects. She appears happy, clean, and amply nourished. Yet her bent back, muscular, chapped arms, and worn clothing reveal the exertion required of her duties. The rusticated brick wall suggests that she works in a basement or other utilitarian space.

Spencer meticulously portrayed the washerwoman's surrounding accoutrements, from suds bucket and washboard to clothespins for drying. As we can deduce from the layering of wrung fabric in the tin basin, she first washed

white fabrics and progressed to darker, less color-fast material. A boy's elaborately trimmed jacket in the popular military style tops the pile of dirty clothes still to be laundered (Spencer had three boys in her household at the time). Such carefully observed details reflect first-hand knowledge of the arduous, day-long laundry process—knowledge that was more commonly held by women.

European painting traditions exerted a powerful influence on Spencer's detailed, highly realistic manner of painting. Because of this work's reliance on nineteenth-century German examples, an unscrupulous individual at some point painted over Spencer's signature and replaced it with the forged signature of Düsseldorf artist Meyer von Bremen (the forged signature has since been removed). This most likely occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, when a European painting would have held more value than an American painting by a female artist whose paintings had by then fallen out of fashion.

Some of the most intriguing questions surrounding this work cannot be answered with any certainty. First and foremost, why did Spencer choose to paint her servant directly engaging the audience with a broad grin, as if sharing a joke? By choosing to capture such an expression, was the artist commemorating the ideals of the happy, compliant servant and of feminine domesticity, or did she subtly undermine such standards with the work's humorous tone, which some critics found unseemly for a female artist? And for whom did Spencer intend the work? Although wealthy collectors might enjoy images of happy servants, the comic element of this and other kitchen subjects by Spencer broke with conventions of gentility and high art. The fact that several of her paintings were reproduced as prints suggests that she may have intended such subjects for the growing middle classes. The images may have held particular appeal for women, who by the mid-nineteenth century were beginning to take a more active role as consumers of household goods.

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As a teaching museum, the Hood Museum of Art is committed to helping visitors develop visual literacy skills—the ability to construct meaning from all that we see. One way it does this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art they encounter.

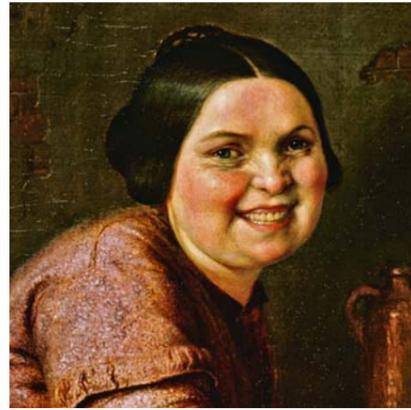
Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this painting.

What do you notice about this woman?

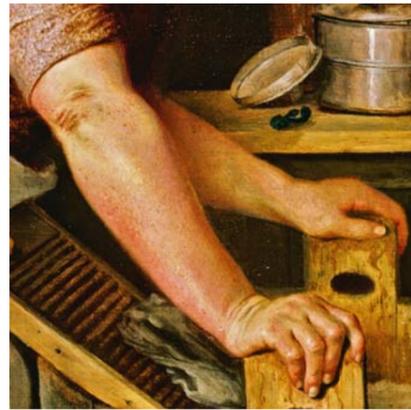
Her body? Her pose? Her dress?



What do you notice about her face?

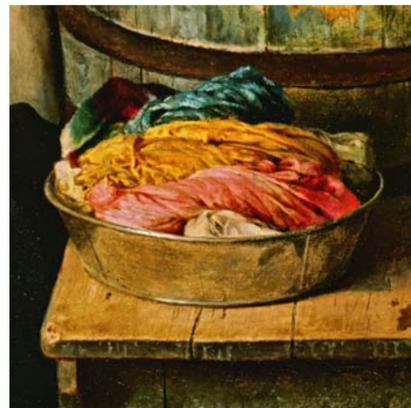
Her expression?

Her hairstyle?



What do you notice about her arms and hands?

What do you notice about the laundry process?



The clothes that have been washed?



The clothes that have yet to be washed?



What is on the table in the background?



What do you notice about the space in which this woman is working?

Look again at the whole painting.

Where is the light coming from? What does it illuminate?

What else do you notice about this painting?

The skill of the artist? The colors? The frame?

Step 2: Analysis

Without reading the label, think about all of this visual information.

Who do you think this woman might be?

When do you think she lived? Where do you think she lived? Why?

What was she doing just before the moment captured in this painting? How do you know?

As you consider each of these questions, look to the painting for clues to support your ideas.